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SUBJECT: INTERVIEWS WITH ESCAPED CNDP SOLDIERS

¶1. (SBU) Summary: On October 20 Goma Poloff had the opportunity to speak with three escaped CNDP soldiers. The soldiers, 13, 15, and 23 years old, had been brought to Goma by MONUC. The interview took place on the MONUC DDRRR compound where a handful of CNDP and FDLR escapees trickle in on a daily basis. They reside briefly in four tents on the compound before they are either taken back to Rwanda or handed over to MONUC Child Protection for reunification with their families. Interestingly, CNDP and FDLR escapees are intermingled in the same tents with no apparent problems. All three individuals spoke Kinyarwanda. If their stories are true the CNDP has been forcibly recruiting child soldiers after agreeing, via the Goma accords, to not do so. End Summary.

Jean-Claude  
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¶2. (SBU) The first interviewee, Jean-Claude, was a 23 year old Rwandan citizen from Kigali and a sergeant in the CNDP. Approximately one year ago, a young friend from his neighborhood approached him and assured him he could find him a job in Goma. Jean-Claude, along with five other boys and young men, paid 2,500 Rwandan francs (approximately \$5) for a bus ticket to Gisenyi, the Rwandan border town adjacent to Goma. A man, who would later be their field commander, met them. The young men spent the night at the man's house in Gisenyi, at which point Jean-Claude learned that he would be going to join the CNDP. He still believed he would be able to earn money, however, and decided to continue.

¶3. (SBU) The next morning at 6:00 am, one and a half hours before the official opening of the border, the six were taken to the border. On the Rwandan side they spoke to no one and showed no papers, though Jean-Claude had an identity card in his possession. On the DRC side they again did not have to show any documents, but did have to pay money to the guard. Since it was early on a Sunday morning there was almost no one at the border. Once in Goma, a man in a mini bus picked them up and drove them directly to Mushake, where they were given food and water and were told that training would begin the next day.

¶4. (SBU) The training consisted of weapons training, but nothing on small unit tactics. The fighting he experienced was all in the Mushake sector of the CNDP-controlled area (Mushake, Sake, and Karuba) and took place in September and October this year. Life in the CNDP was extremely difficult, particularly because there was not much food - mostly cornmeal and water. Also, Jean-Claude complained, since arriving in Mushake he had not been paid one franc. Thus, three days prior to the interview, he decided to leave the CNDP. He was sent on an errand to fetch milk, but instead ran into the bush to wait for nightfall. At 7:00 pm he approached Mushake town and found a cow herder who, upon learning his intentions, told him to approach the MONUC base in town with his rifle over his head. Jean-Claude did this and was taken into the base and later to the DDRRR camp in Goma. When asked if other soldiers in the CNDP knew they had this "option" of leaving the CNDP, Jean-Claude assumed they did, but noted that it was not

something that was discussed with others; it was a decision taken individually.

15. (SBU) Jean-Claude stated that the CNDP had been recruiting many young boys locally. Theoretically no one under 16 would be recruited, and those under 18 would serve only as porters and not participate in combat. (Note: Other interviewees revealed that this system was not always respected. End note.) Forced recruitment had escalated recently - as human rights organizations in Goma also have confirmed - with 100 individuals recruited in a single day in Mushake, of whom roughly 40 were below the age of 18. The population was not happy with these developments, so some families decided to leave the area to avoid forced recruitment.

16. (SBU) Jean-Claude, when prompted, also commented on other aspects of CNDP life. He said a common punishment was to be beaten with a stick. Examples of punishable crimes included the deliberate killing of a civilian and rape (Note: Poloff had heard CNDP leaders state this before, though groups such as Human Rights Watch claim that indiscriminate killing and executions of collaborators were common. End note.) Jean-Claude had himself not witnessed any executions.

17. (SBU) From his position (which was one of receiving orders rather than giving them), Jean-Claude always felt that Laurent Nkunda was firmly in charge. He had not been aware of any potential divisions in the CNDP command structure. He also did not remember seeing any RDF (Rwandan Defense Force) officers, though the CNDP commanders would often allude to the notion that at the last minute the Rwandans could come across the border and save the day. He said taking Goma was regularly portrayed as the ultimate military

KINSHASA 00000919 002 OF 002

objective for the CNDP, but that the leadership did not want to openly confront MONUC. Finally, when asked what kind of movement he felt the CNDP was, Jean-Claude said it was a Tutsi movement, but that many Hutu were in its ranks. He said this was not a source of internal division among CNDP soldiers.

Luc  
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18. (SBU) Luc was a 15 year old Congolese boy from the Mweso area who had fled from the ranks of the CNDP two days earlier. In early April 2008, his church was surrounded by CNDP soldiers during a Sunday service. The commander entered the church and told the priest they would be taking all the young boys. The CNDP "recruited" 16 boys under the age of 18 and some younger than 16. Within a month he had learned to shoot and in May was involved in a firefight (he was uncertain whether it was against FARDC or PARECO) in the Mweso area during which three of the 16 boys were killed. (Note: There did not seem to be as many children within the CNDP at the time -- just the 13 remaining boys out of 200 individuals -- compared to the more recent situation described by Jean-Claude. End note.)

19. (SBU) Luc said that living conditions with the CNDP were bad. Like Jean-Claude, he received cornmeal to eat and it was often spoiled. He was a porter and was not expected to participate in combat operations unless the fighting was intense. During the fighting in September he did not participate in the attack on Nyanzale but he did end up fighting PARECO later around Mweso. When he saw his chance, Luc left his unit at night and walked about eight kilometers before sleeping. The next day he made his way to Kitchanga where he approached MONUC and was then brought to Goma.

110. (SBU) When asked, Luc said he took drugs -- a marijuana-like substance -- while with the CNDP. However, he did this because everyone else did, mostly to distract themselves from the fact that they were tired and hungry. The drugs could be purchased in most major markets, usually with some of the money that officers had given them to buy food. He did not give the impression that drugs were supplied to the children in a deliberate fashion by the CNDP leadership.

Patrick

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¶11. (SBU) Patrick was also a Congolese boy, 13, from around Mweso. He claimed to have been recruited a year ago. His abduction happened while he was in school. Approximately a dozen CNDP soldiers came to the school and informed the teacher that they would be taking the oldest boys. There had been older boys in other classrooms, but Patrick thought they must have known what was happening when they saw the soldiers arriving because they fled and escaped. Patrick was also involved in combat against PARECO in early October. Six of the people in his unit of 100 were young children. Two days prior to the interview he had also left his guard post with three other boys and went to Kitchanga where MONUC took him in. Both Patrick and Luc had no idea where their parents were. However, they feared going home, because that was where they had been abducted and they might face punitive action if caught by CNDP.

¶12. (SBU) Comment: The accounts of these young combatants is a vivid description of the continuing tragedy of forced recruitment of child soldiers in the eastern DRC. Although many, if not all, armed groups in the Kivus are guilty of this practice, these youngsters were abducted by the CNDP, which has denied accusations that it recruits child soldiers. As Luc's claim that he and other children were forcibly recruited as late as April of this year -- after the Goma agreements were signed -- this also calls into question the CNDP's good faith, from the beginning, vis-a-vis the Amani process.  
End Comment.

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